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SUBJECT: EMBASSY MINSK WEEKLY REPORT - May 12, 2006

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MINSK 00000521 001.12 OF 003

¶1. The following are brief items of interest compiled by Embassy Minsk.

Civil Society

¶2. Zubr Leader Nikita Sasim Sentenced to Three Months in Jail

On May 12, Zubr youth leader Nikita Sasim was sentenced in Baranichsky Regional Court to three months arrest for draft evasion. Sasim had received a waiver from military service due to head injuries caused by police during a peaceful protest in September 2005. Sasim spent two months in pre-trial detention, which counts as time served.

¶3. Kalyakin and Vyachorka Released, Ready to Continue Struggle

On May 11, a Minsk police vehicle brought Sergei Kalyakin, leader of the Belarusian Party of Communists, and Vintsuk Vyachorka, leader of the Belarusian Popular Front, home after they served 14 and 15 days, respectively, for participating in an unauthorized opposition demonstration commemorating the twentieth anniversary of the Chernobyl nuclear accident. Journalists were unable to speak with Kalyakin and Vyachorka upon their release since police freed them 30 minutes early. Kalyakin later returned to the Okrestina Street detention center to speak with journalists. Kalyakin said that conditions in the jail had been normal but that he and other opposition leaders were put in separate cells a few days after detention. Kalyakin stated, "Probably authorities were afraid that we would devise a plan to fight the regime but such a plan does exist and we will carry on our struggle."

¶4. Lebedko, Twelve Others Detained Before Demonstration

On May 12, Anatoly Lebedko, leader of the United Civic Party, was released three hours after police detained him at 6 p.m. as he traveled to Oktyabrskaya Square to participate in a demonstration commemorating the anniversary of the 1999 disappearance of Yury Zakharenko. Police dispersed the demonstration when several people displayed images of Zakharenko and jailed opposition politicians and activists including Sergei Kalyakin, Aleksandr Bukhvostov, and Nikita Sasim. Police also detained twelve others before the demonstration and later released them.

¶5. Ten Youths Reported Arrested after Meeting with Milinkevich

On May 12, police arrested and later released ten youth activists at a public bus stop following their meeting with opposition leader Aleksandr Milinkevich near the detention center on Okrestina Street

from which he was released earlier that day. Milinkevich had returned to Okrestina Street four hours after his release to meet with several dozen supporters. The police declared the gathering to be unauthorized and made the arrests.

¶6. Police search Lew Sapeha Foundation and Home of Deputy Head

On May 11, police searched the Grodno office of Belarus' Lew Sapeha Foundation officially connected to a criminal case opened in March against four members of Partnyorstvo (Partnership), an unregistered group that tried to organize independent observation in March's presidential election. With a search warrant issued by the Minsk City Prosecutor's Office, police also searched the apartment of Vladimir Khilmanovich, deputy chairman of the Lew Sapeha Foundation, and seized computer equipment and documents. Two years ago, police searched Mr. Khilmanovich's home and seized computer equipment, which they returned three months later.

Human Rights

¶7. Helsinki Committee Chair Detained, Report Seized at Airport

On May 12, border officials barred human rights NGO Belarusian Helsinki Committee (BHC) chairwoman Tatiana Protko from traveling abroad as she attempted to board an airplane for Germany to deliver a report on Belarus. The border guards prevented her from departing while police seized the BHC human rights report and a documentary about the recent presidential elections from her. The authorities released Protko without charges after she missed her flight. She claimed the illegal detention was a GOB effort to prevent BHC from providing information about the human rights situation in Belarus to the international community. Protko was allowed to travel the next day.

MINSK 00000521 002.2 OF 003

Elections

¶8. Local Election Date May Be Announced in November

On May 11, Nikolai Lozovik, secretary of the Central Election Commission, said that the date of Belarusian local elections must be announced in November. According to Lozovik, three months are required to prepare for elections and the elections must be held no later than one month before the current elected councils' mandate runs out under the country's Electoral Code. Therefore, local elections must be held before February 2, 2007.

International Relations

¶9. Belarus and China Seek More IT Cooperation

On May 10, the Chinese ambassador to Belarus, Wu Hong Bin, said that Zhong Xing Telecommunications Corporation (ZTE) has made a first step in developing IT cooperation between China and Belarus. ZTE donated more than USD one million of equipment to a training center at Higher State Communications College in Minsk. Ambassador Wu expressed hope that the IT sector will accelerate economic growth in Belarus. According to the Belarusian ambassador to China, Anatoly Tozik, Belarusian-Chinese relations have reached a serious and strategic level. According to Tozik, two Belarusian banks, Belarusbank and Belvneshekonombank, expect to open offices in China later this year for financing joint projects. [Note: Lukashenko previously ordered his government to open bank branches in China.]

¶10. Belarus Wants More Cooperation with Israel

Deputy Foreign Minister Viktor Gaisenok announced that Belarus is interested in closer cooperation with Israel through top-level contacts and international organizations. Gaisenok suggested expanded economic, scientific, technical and environmental relations and proposed cooperation between Belarus and Israel in fighting terrorism. The Israeli Ambassador to Belarus, Zeev Ben Arie, reportedly was open to expanded cooperation, particularly in agriculture. [Note: The government of Belarus is currently strengthening its already close ties with Syria and Iran, while it allows a Palestinian Authority "embassy" to operate in Minsk.]

Economy

¶11. Belarus' VAT May Rise to 21% to Cover Gas Prices

On May 11, the Belarusian Finance Ministry proposed raising Belarus' Value-Added Tax (VAT) from 18% to 21% in 2007 to compensate for losses caused by the expected three-fold rise in prices of Russian gas. The rise in the VAT rate will allow the government to form a reserve of about 1.22 trillion Belarusian rubles, the equivalent USD 560-570 million, most likely to subsidize gas for certain customers.

¶12. Belarusian Gasoline Prices Increase 2.5%

On May 10, the Belarusian State Petrochemical Concern (Belneftekhim) raised wholesale and retail prices of gasoline and diesel fuel by an average 2.5%. Depending on grade, Belneftekhim sells gasoline at 1,200-1,720 rubles (between 50 and 75 US cents) per liter. Belneftekhim last raised gasoline prices on January 11.

Health Issues

¶13. 300 New Cases of HIV Since Beginning of the Year

On May 11, Mikhail Rimzha, Deputy Minister of Health, said that almost 300 new HIV cases have been recorded in Belarus since January 1; 7,309 people were diagnosed HIV positive as of May 1 compared with 7,014 at the end of 2005. More than 1,500 people with AIDS have already died in Belarus. According to Mr. Rimzha, teenagers have begun listening to warnings about the risks of HIV infection. He advocated involvement of young people in implementing health promotion projects on the grounds that peer education is much more effective than lectures from adults.

¶14. More Than One Million Belarusians Have Drinking Problems

On May 12, Vladimir Maksimchuk, the chief addictions officer in the
MINSK 00000521 003.2 OF 003

Belarusian Health Ministry, said that about one million people in Belarus have drinking problems. Maksimchuk said that 171,000 people, including 39,000 women, have been officially diagnosed with alcohol addiction and 60,000 others risk developing addiction. However, he estimated that the actual number may be as high as one million. According to Maksimchuk, there are also 10,000 registered drug addicts in the country. [Note: Belarus' population is just under 10 million.]

Quote of the Week

¶15. On May 12, while speaking to a gathering of residents in the Mogilev region of Belarus on Friday, Aleksandr Lukashenko promised housing incentives to encourage women to mother more children. Lukashenko explained, "If a woman knows that an apartment will cost 5@percent less after the birth of the third child and will be given for free after the birth of the fifth child, she will give birth to more children."

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